

In the Heartland With Bishop Pates

Peace in the Holy Land A Consuming Challenge

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I joined 17 other U.S. Bishops in an eye-opening trip to the Holy Land, September 11-18.

The trip was billed as: “U.S. Bishops’ Prayer Pilgrimage for Peace to the Holy Land.” Our theme was simple: Prayer is powerful, peace is possible, and we stand committed to supporting a two state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli impasse: a secure and recognized Israel living in peace with a viable and independent Palestinian state.

Since the power of prayer was the central conviction of our journey we began our time together with Mass at the Franciscan Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre. It is here where Jesus rose from the dead sealing victory over sin and assuring the triumph of the good. In the search for peace in the Holy Land, Jesus’ rising from the dead is the foundation of our hope.

In the following days, we celebrated Eucharist at central shrines in the life of Jesus: the Annunciation, the Visitation, Bethlehem, and the Church of the Flagellation. We also joined in prayer with ecumenical and interreligious leaders: Greek and Armenian Orthodox, Lutherans as well as Jewish and Muslim representatives. The religious community is united in its support for peace. Hopefully, it might be a wedge of significant influence on secular/political leaders.

One of our first meetings on the pilgrimage was with His Beatitude, Patriarch Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. The Patriarch is similar to our understanding of an Archbishop with responsibility for Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus. He was appreciative of the support the patriarchate receives from America and, in particular, from the Knights and Ladies of the Holy Sepulchre who substantially help maintain the Catholic parishes and schools in this territory.

Patriarch Twal is concerned about the alarming emigration of Christians from the Holy Land. His Beatitude advised us that the unresolved conflict and Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory undermine human dignity and the ability of Christians to raise their families. Israeli policies in East Jerusalem prohibit Christians who marry someone outside the city to remain there with their spouse. In addition, Israeli security policies restrict movement and confiscate lands, undermining the ability of many Christian families to survive economically. The realities of Israeli occupation force them to leave. Statistics reveal the reality: Prior to 1948, Christians accounted for nearly 20 percent of the population of what is now Israel/Palestine. Today, that figure is less than 2 percent.

We bishops also had the fortunate opportunity to visit local Christian communities. I was one of four companions who visited Gaza some 10 days after the cease fire took hold in the Israeli-Gaza conflict.

We celebrated Mass with the Holy Family Catholic Parish, visited with parishioners, and spent time with Blessed Teresa of Calcutta’s Missionaries of Charity who provide homes for handicapped children and elderly in Gaza. The Catholic parish and the Jerusalem Patriarchate operate two Catholic schools educating 1,000 children, approximately 50 of whom are Christian.

We also took the opportunity to have a meal with 70 Catholic Relief Service workers and their partners from other non-governmental organizations. Heroically, all of these aid workers remained in place with the Gazans throughout the bitter duration of the 50 day military bombardment of Gaza.

We were also given a tour of the devastation by a CRS employee who speaks fluent English and has lived in Gaza his entire life. The damage was extensive. A greater proportion of the regular nightly bombing occurred in residential areas. Preliminary warning – a matter of brief moments was given before the bombing. Bombing and subsequent destruction, in large measure in residential areas, were particularly heart-rending for Gazans. It requires generations to gain ownership of a home for a particular family. Homes are the center of their lives – enabling and supporting a culture which is very family oriented.

Since there were no “safe places” the women and children poured into the streets when the bombing began only to suffer many deaths and injuries. We were told that this perhaps accounts for the disproportionate number of casualties: Israelis about 80 (70 or so military) and Gazans 2,300 or so with a significant proportion being women and children.

We were also shown one of several multiple story business buildings, now rubble, which allegedly were destroyed a day before the final truce took effect.

I was in Gaza this past January. At that time the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Gaza described the enclave as an “open prison.” I noted then the situation was intolerable for human habitation. Today it is simply much worse.

On the return to Jerusalem from Gaza, we stopped to visit Sderot, an Israeli town about 4 kilometers from Gaza as the crow flies. The basic impact on this community was the disturbance of air raid sirens calling to take shelter. We were told of the casualty of one child playing soccer during this conflict.

On the pilgrimage, we also had the opportunity to speak with several political leaders:

- Dr. Rami Hamdallah, Prime Minister of Palestine
- Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, Palestinian Legislative Council member and Director of the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy
- Mr. Akiva Tor, Head of World Jewish Affairs and World Religious Bureau
- Rabbi Shlomo Riskin (born and raised in New York)
- U.S. Council General Michael Ratney

Emerging from these meetings was a basic consensus that there are two or three versions of a plan, that with dedicated and serious negotiations, a peace agreement could emerge. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be the political will to move forward.

Present situations that cause friction and ongoing frustration are continuing placement of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory. These have been decried by American and international political leaders.

Another issue is the seemingly excessive security measures. Six of our bishops, within a few kilometers of celebrating Mass at St. Joseph Parish in Jifna Village, were stopped and turned away at an Israeli check point. On another occasion, it took an hour and a half for the full pilgrimage group to negotiate a checkpoint on our trip from Ramallah to Tel Aviv-Jaffa to meet with President Shimon Peres. An hour trip thus turned into two and a half hours.

Among the foremost highlights of the trip was a meeting with President Shimon Peres of Israel. At 91, he had just left the presidency about a month before our gathering with him and is a first class and engaging statesman. He currently heads the Peres Center for Peace in Tel Aviv-Jaffa.

The Center for Peace is committed not only to strive for peace in the Holy Land but throughout the Middle East. It is undertaking projects that address poverty and the lack of basic resources that create tensions often leading to turmoil and conflict. Among the center's projects:

- Increasing the water supply by threefold through desalinization;
- Increasing the food supply through preservation of food that is otherwise wasted;
- Producing medicines from a fruit and vegetable base rather than chemicals.

President Peres has met with Pope Francis four times and considers him to be the most internationally trusted leader in the promotion of peace. He attributes this to the Pope's lack of a political agenda.

Reflecting on the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, the Pope offers guidance. In working indefatigably for global peace, the Holy Father constantly insists on a simple path forward: We are all created by one God and belong to one human family. We are therefore all brothers and sisters. We should work together enabling and protecting the life and dignity of all these brothers and sisters in this one human family.

Together as part of this world family, I urge us to activate and live such relationships which hopefully will eventuate in the possibility of peace for all God's children.